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The Nature Of The Church
According To The Radical Continental
Reformation

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To

Pastor and Mrs. John H. Haldeman

Allapattah Baptist Church

Miami, Florida

this essay is gratefully dedicated.

Author, 12-10-57, 165

PREFACE

This essay is an effort to restate on the basis of the sources the concepts of the nature of the Christian church which were set forth in the radical wing of the Reformation on the continent of Europe during the period from 1521 to 1575. Since discussions concerning the church today are legion and since the "left-wing" of the Reformation, long neglected and misinterpreted, is now being given serious study by competent scholars, it may be said that this essay is concerned with the juncture of these two contemporary trends.

I am particularly indebted to Professor George H. Williams, Winn Professor of Ecclesiastical History, Harvard Divinity School, under whose direction this research was done, and to Professor William R. Estep, Professor of Church History, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, whose concern for the study of Anabaptism has stimulated my interest in the field. For the encouragement of my colleagues, especially Professors W. Boyd Hunt, John P. Newport, Robert A. Baker, and Charles P. Johnson, I am deeply grateful. My wife has generously contributed by the typing of the manuscript and through valuable suggestions.

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THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO THE RADICAL CONTINENTAL REFORMATION¹

Franklin H. Littell's *The Anabaptist View of the Church* (1952) is the most thorough delineation of that trend in contemporary scholarship which finds the essence of Anabaptism in its concept of the church. In particular, Littell interprets the Anabaptist movement from the focal point of the fall and restitution of the true church. Although this volume contains references to the Spiritualists and Anti-Trinitarians, these are to an extent outside the scope of its subject matter.² Furthermore, Littell's primary purpose is not the exposition of Anabaptist ecclesiology, but rather the interpretation of Anabaptism from the standpoint of its historically and apologetically oriented doctrine of the true church (*die rechte Kirche*).³ Littell's work should stimulate further studies of the ecclesiology of the entire "radical" wing of the sixteenth century Reformation. This essay is a preliminary attempt to mark out some of the areas which call for additional study and which are of significance for the understanding of the church in the twentieth century. First, the question will be raised as to what, if anything, the Anabaptists, the Spiritualists, and the Anti-Trinitarians had in common in their understanding of the Christian church. Secondly, an effort will be made to demarcate some distinct concepts of the church. These ecclesiological types are construed, not from the total theology of their advocates, but, so far as possible, from the concept of the nature of the church alone. Finally, the nature of the church will be further examined by reference to the basic affirmations made and analogies applied to the church. Here primary, though not exclusive, attention will be given to the Anabaptists.

¹The term "Radical Reformation," employed by George H. Williams, ed., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, "Library of Christian Classics," vol. XXV (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 19-22, is used in this essay in preference to the term "left-wing" Reformation, used by John T. McNeill, "Left Wing Religious Movements" in *A Short History of Christianity*, ed. by Archibald G. Baker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), 127-132, and by Roland H. Bainton, "The Left Wing of the Reformation," *Journal of Religion*, XXI (1941), 124-134. The application of "left" to this phase of the Reformation was not inaugurated by McNeill and Bainton, for Thomas Armitage in his *A History of the Baptists* (New York, 1887), p. 399, quoted an article on "Anabaptists" in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as follows: "Anabaptism, as a system, may be defined as the Reformation doctrine, carried to its utmost limit; the Anabaptists were the extreme left of the army of the Reformation." *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* hereafter cited as SAW.

²On the Spiritualists, cf. Littell, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 34-39, and on the Anti-Trinitarians, especially pp. 62f. Cf. Littell, "Spiritualizers, Anabaptists and the Church," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XXIX (January, 1955), 34-43. Hereafter cited as MQR.

³Anabaptist concepts and usage would seem to make *die rechte Gemeinde* preferable to *die rechte Kirche*.

I.

THE COMMON DENOMINATOR: THE FALL OF THE TRUE CHURCH

The religious climate of sixteenth century western Europe, in which Anabaptists, Spiritualists, and Anti-Trinitarians came into being, was that of the challenge of Roman institutional Christianity, first at the point of its practices and then with respect to its teachings—chiefly its principle of authority and its soteriological doctrine, together with that of a Protestant reconstruction on the basis of *Volkskirchen* that purposely did not basically alter the fundamental nature of the church. A study of Anabaptist, Spiritualist, and Anti-Trinitarian writings shows that in each movement criticism of the Roman and Protestant churches was a prominent feature. These criticisms only rarely proceeded from what may be called abstract ecclesiological principles alone. In fact, the moral and religious conditions within Roman and Protestant churches often formed the center of the polemic.⁴

The concept of a fallen or corrupted Christendom was a recurrent theme among the radical writers. Yet, when did this fall occur? From Polish Anabaptism comes the record of the dating of the fall of Christendom "with the death of Simeon, the last of the grand old men who had known Jesus and the Twelve," in 111 A. D. on the basis of Eusebius.⁵ Sebastian Franck wrote in 1531 concerning an alteration of "the outward church of Christ" which occurred "right after the death of the apostles" or fourteen hundred years before, i. e., 131 A. D. The outward church, according to Franck, "went up into heaven and lies concealed in the Spirit and in truth," and for fourteen centuries "there has existed no gathered church nor any sacrament."⁶ The question as to whether this is, for Franck, the fall or the "maturation" of Christianity has been rightly raised by George H. Williams.⁷ Franck's concept seems to have influenced John Campanus, and through Campanus it seems to have been transmitted to the Wasenberger preachers and Bernard Rothmann of Munster.⁸ Thomas Munster affirmed that the Christian church "did not remain a virgin any longer than up to the time of the death of the disciples of the apostles and soon thereafter became an adulteress."⁹ More common

⁴*Infra*, 40.

⁵Earl Morse Wilbur, ed., *A History of the Polish Reformation by Stanislaus Lubieniecki*. MSS, p. 33, cited by Littell, *op. cit.*, pp. 62, 126. Cf. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae*, III, 32.

⁶"A Letter to John Campanus," SAW, p. 149.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 149, n. 11.

⁸Campanus' *Contra totum post apostolos mundum* (1529) is not extant. His *Restitution* was written in 1532. Rothmann wrote *Restitution rechter und gesunder christlicher Lehre* and *Bekenntnisse van beyden sacramenten* (1533) after Henrik Rol had called his attention to Campanus' *Contra*. . . Cf. Littell, *op. cit.*, pp. 40, 73.

⁹"Sermon Before the Princes," SAW, p. 51.

among radical writers is the dating of the fall of the true church in the era of Constantine, in which the union of church and state began to be forged. This interpretation occurs in one passage in the Hutterite Chronicle, according to which "the cross was conquered and forged to the sword . . . through the slyness of the Old Serpent."¹⁰ Michael Servetus also dated the fall of true Christianity in the fourth century, but for different reasons from those expressed by Anabaptists. For Servetus the fall occurred at the Council of Nicea (325) with its dogmatic formulation of Trinitarian doctrine.¹¹ Menno Simons held that the fall was a process, beginning in early Christian times, increasing under Constantine, and culminating in Innocent I's edict enforcing infant baptism (407).¹² Other writers, while emphatic that the fall had occurred, were less concerned to date it. Obbe Philips in his "Confession" declared that "the first church of Christ and the apostles was destroyed and ruined in early times by Antichrist."¹³ Pilgram Marpeck, representing South German Anabaptism, discounted apostolic succession but affirmed that "Christ's commands were truly observed in the church for over a millennium after His passion, resurrection, and ascension."¹⁴ Dietrich Philips in the most extended ecclesiological treatise of the radical Reformation mentioned a "first falling away from God in his congregation (*Gemeynste*)" among angels in heaven and a "second falling away" with the sin of Adam and Eve but was strangely silent as to a falling away after the beginning of distinctly Christian history.¹⁵ Thus for Dietrich Philips the fall is essentially the fall of angels and of men in the primordial sense. Whether this silence indicates that the author held to some continuity of the true church through the medieval era¹⁶ or whether the silence is due to his desire to dissociate himself from all contemporary schemes positing a chronologically identifiable restoration is not certain. The Hutterite Chronicle has been interpreted as supporting the continuity of the people of God through "a righteous remnant within or alongside of the ancient and medieval church."¹⁷ The absence of the explicit idea of the fall of the church in the extant writings of the Swiss Brethren is likely explicable, in all cases except that of Hubmaier,¹⁸ on

¹⁰A. J. F. Zieglschmid, *Die älteste chronik der Hutterischen Bruder* (Philadelphia: Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation, 1943), p. 34, translated and cited by Littell, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

¹¹Roland H. Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951), p. 77.

¹²Cornelius Krahn, *Menno Simons* (Karlsruhe i. B.: Heinrich Schneider, 1936), p. 136, cited by Littell, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

¹³SAW, p. 207.

¹⁴John C. Wenger, "The Theology of Pilgrim Marpeck," *MQR*, XII (October, 1938), 245-246, based on Marpeck, *Verantwortung*, 565.

¹⁵"The Church of God," SAW, pp. 229f.

¹⁶Williams, SAW, p. 227. Dietrich Philips refers to a "first falling away" (angels in heaven) and a "second falling away" (Adam and Eve) but only to a "first restoration" (protevangelium, Gen. 3:15).

¹⁷Williams, SAW, p. 39.

¹⁸*Infra*, 71-75.

the ground that the idea is a more theoretical formulation than was necessary in the hazardous beginnings of the Swiss movement. The admonition of Conrad Grebel and others to Thomas Muntzer, "Go forward with the Word and establish a Christian church with the help of Christ and his rule . . .," implied a discontinuity with the apostolic church order.¹⁹ Caspar Schwenckfeld's criticism of all visible, external churches, whether Roman, Lutheran, Zwinglian-Calvinist, or Anabaptist, and his spiritualizing of Christianity would seem to imply the fall of the church,²⁰ but this is made unnecessary, strictly speaking, by virtue of his concept of an invisible, universal church.

The concept of a fall of the true Christian church, and especially Dietrich Philips' idea of a falling away in the congregation of God, suggests the related problem of the origin of the church. The origin, if less explicitly stated and less frequently mentioned by radical writers, nevertheless formed an essential presupposition of their concept of the church. Did the radicals teach that the church was coextensive with the people of God and thus derivative from the dawn of the human race or even from the heavenly order, or did they teach that the Christian church was the result of the advent of Jesus Christ into human history? Actually both views are to be found. Dietrich Philips' "The Church of God" embodies the first view. After tracing the people of God in the Old Testament, Philips concludes, "Thus the congregation of God from the beginning existed in Christ, by whom all things are renewed." His idea of two congregations, God's and the devil's, is basically Augustinian. The congregation of God was "extended" to the Gentiles.²¹ The same idea of two congregations and of "the church of the pious . . . from the beginning" is held by Menno; yet, in reply to Gellius Faber's pedobaptist argument of "but one church and one faith, in the Old and New Testament, from the time of Adam to the end of the world," Menno affirmed that "each dispensation has its own doctrine, ordinance, and usage."²² For Peter Riedemann the separation of "the devout from the godless" from Adam's day onward was not so much an affirmation of the origin of the church as an argument for separation in his own day.²³ On the contrary, Pilgram Marpeck espoused the view that the Christian church began at Pentecost; this he asserted on the basis of the future

¹⁹"Letters to Thomas Muntzer by Conrad Grebel and Friends," SAW, p. 79.

²⁰Selina Gerhard Schultz, *Caspar Schwenckfeld von Ossig* (Norristown, Pa.: Board of Publication of the Schwenckfelder Church, 1947), pp. 327f.

²¹SAW, pp. 228-234, esp. 233f.

²²"Reply to Gellius Faber" (1554), Leonard Verduin, trans., *The Complete Works of Menno Simons, c. 1496-1561* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956), pp. 734-739, 683.

²³Peter Rideman, *Account of Our Religion, Doctrine and Faith*. Trans. by Kathleen E. Hasenberg (Bromdon, Bridgnorth, Salop, England: Plough Publishing House, 1950), p. 139.

tense in "I will build" (Matt. 16:18).²⁴ Also in Marpeck the idea of the two covenants was more sharply defined.²⁵

II.

DIFFERING CONCEPTS OF THE TRUE CHURCH: ITS RESTITUTION, ITS NATURE, ITS IDENTITY

One does not for long study the radical Reformation without discovering the real and divergent distinctions as to the nature of the remedy to be applied to sick, corrupt, fallen Christendom. If the fall of the true church afforded a common denominator for Anabaptist, Spiritualist, and Anti-Trinitarian, the restoration of the true church became their point of separation or disjuncture.

The radical Reformation contained the frequently enunciated concept of "restitution," which has been recently studied by Frank J. Wray.²⁶ Probably derived from the Humanism of Erasmus and Zwingli and possibly also from Joachimitism, the concept was, as Littell suggests, conveyed to Anabaptists through George Witzel.²⁷ The term was used in book titles by John Campanus, Rothmann,²⁸ and Servetus,²⁹ as the title for a portion of David Joris' *'T Wonder-boeck*, as the title for a tract by Dietrich Philips, by the Familist, Henry Nicolaes, and by William Postel. In the Bern Debate of 1538 the Anabaptists argued that the true church had ceased for a time and that they themselves had undertaken a new beginning. The Hutterite Chronicle initially dated the time of the restitution as that of Luther's theses (1517), but later revisions dated it 1524, 1525, or 1526 in Switzerland.³⁰ Riedemann, the Hutterite, compared the re-establishment of the true church with the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.³¹ At the same time opposition to any restoration of an external, visible church was expressed by Franck, Caspar Schwenckfeld, John Bunderlin and others. The concept of restitution was especially prominent in the Netherlander-North German region. Not only did restorationists differ from anti-restorationists, but among restorationists there were basic differences. This suggests the need for a clear demarcation of the types of "true church" doctrine found in the radical Reformation.

The first ecclesiological type to be noted is that of a restored, gathered congregation or brotherhood of baptized believers under discipline and separated from the world and from the state. At first glance one would hasten to call this the Anabaptist view of the church.

²⁴Wenger, *op. cit.*, p. 244, based on Marpeck, *Testamentserlautering*, 202A.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 208-212, 242f.

²⁶"The Anabaptist Doctrine of the Restitution of the Church," *MQR*, XXVIII (July, 1954), 186-196.

²⁷Littell, *op. cit.*, p. 73. Cf. *supra*, 8.

²⁸*Supra*, 8.

²⁹*Christianismi Restitutio* (1553).

³⁰Wray, *op. cit.*, pp. 193f.

³¹Rideman, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

Yet the distinctive Hutterite development prevents such a ready conclusion. This is the concept of the true church which predominated among the Swiss Brethren, the Täufer of South Germany, Tirol, etc., and the Mennonites of North Germany, the Netherlands, and Prussia. Harold S. Bender defines the concept as follows:

The church (*Gemeinde*), according to the Anabaptists, is a voluntary and exclusive fellowship of truly converted believers in Christ, committed to follow Him in full obedience as Lord; it is a brotherhood, not an institution.³²

The letter of Conrad Grebel and others to Muntzer (1524) embodies this concept of the church in the admonition to Muntzer to establish a disciplined Christian congregation, and the failure of Muntzer to reply may have been due in part to his differing conception of the church and its relation to the kingdom.³³ The Schleithem Confession (1527) is evidence of the early acceptance of the idea of a separated and disciplined congregation.³⁴ Pilgram Marpeck, especially in his *Verantwortung*, in reply to Schwenckfeld urges the necessity of the restoration of an organized true church. For him no contemporary commission is needed, only the Scriptures, which contain the commission of Christ. Such a true church is not based on apostolic succession but created by the proclamation of the Word of God and patterned according to the New Testament. Marpeck, according to Wenger, regarded the church as "the present manifestation of the Kingdom."³⁵ In Menno Simons the doctrine of the true church of the reborn is set in contrast to "the church of the Antichrist."³⁶ Cornelius Krahn speaks of "*Menno's ecclesiozentrische Theologie*." What was a peripheral concern to Luther, namely, the concept of an *ecclesiola in ecclesia* in his "German Mass," was central to Menno Simons. While Calvin's concept of the church was "*alttestamentlich-theokratisch*," that of Menno was "*neutestamentlich-christozentrisch*."³⁷ Menno did not hesitate to confess, "I believe in one holy, Christian church, the community of saints," but this affirmation had for him a distinctly qualitative connotation.³⁸ The same basic understanding of the true church is manifest in Dietrich Philips. He assumes that the restoration has taken place and is primarily concerned to characterize the true church.³⁹ Nicholas Felbinger, a Hutterite, wrote in 1560:

³²"Church," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1955), I, 594.

³³SAW, pp. 73-85. Williams states that "it is clear that the preacher of the Sermon Before the Princes . . . had a different spirit from theirs" (p. 72).

³⁴Wenger, "The Schleithem Confession of Faith," *MQR*, XIX (October, 1945), 243-253.

³⁵Wenger, "Pilgram Marpeck, Tyrolese Engineer and Anabaptist Elder," *Church History*, IX (March, 1940), 31, 34f.; Wenger, "The Theology of Pilgram Marpeck," p. 243, based on Marpeck, *Testaments erlauterung*, 210.

³⁶"Reply to Gellius Faber," pp. 734-739.

³⁷Krahn, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-119.

³⁸"Reply to Gellius Faber," p. 754.

³⁹"The Church of God," SAW, pp. 228-260.

I have not left the true Christian Church; I have but joined her and let myself be incorporated into her by true Christian baptism. I have no doubt that I am in the true community and fellowship of the saints. . . . Thus I have not left the true Christian Church, but the so-called 'Christian' congregation of sinners and the unjust, prostitutes, adulterers, gamblers, slanderers of God, gluttons, winebibbers, liars, covetous men and idolaters who do not cease to rouse God to wrath."⁴⁰

Even Ludwig Haetzer, described as "a marginal Anabaptist," left Zwinglianism not because of "dogmatic reasons" but "by consideration of church policy."⁴¹

Such a concept of the true church as a gathered and disciplined community of believers separated from the world and from the state was quite often identified or described in terms of certain "ordinances" or marks. Grebel in his protestation before the Zurich Council insisted on baptism and the Lord's Supper rightly administered.⁴² The Schleithem Confession bespeaks agreement concerning baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the ban.⁴³ Dietrich Philips discussed in detail "the seven ordinances of the true church." These were "the pure and unfalsified doctrine of the Word" together with "correct ministers," the "Scriptural use of baptism and the Lord's Supper," footwashing, evangelical separation including the ban, brotherly love according to Christ's command, the keeping of all Christ's commands, and suffering and persecution.⁴⁴ Menno Simons similarly listed six such signs of the true church. Four of these were identical with those of Philips; Menno omitted footwashing and evangelical separation and expanded suffering into two statements.⁴⁵

The second distinct ecclesiological type in the radical Reformation is that of the church-community, which was distinctive among the Hutterian Brethren. The Hutterites shared with Anabaptism in general the ideas of a gathered, baptized, and disciplined congregation separated from the world, but held to the apostolicity and necessity of community of goods.⁴⁶ This meant that in the Hutterite conception the congregation of believers was co-extensive with a socio-economic community. Thus Ulrich Stadler could say, "There is one communion (*gmain*) of all the faithful in Christ and one community (*gmain-schaft*) of the holy children called of God."⁴⁷ To the Cyprianic doc-

⁴⁰Robert Friedmann, "Claus Felbinger's Confession of 1560," *MQR*, XXIX (April, 1955), 155.

⁴¹Gerhard Goeters, "Ludwig Haetzer, A Marginal Anabaptist," *MQR*, XXIX (October, 1955), 253.

⁴²Harold S. Bender, *Conrad Grebel c. 1498-1526; The Founder of the Swiss Brethren Sometimes Called Anabaptists* (Goshen, Ind.: Menonite Historical Society, 1950), p. 204, based on *Protestation*, p. 369.

⁴³Wenger, "The Schleithem Confession of Faith," arts. 1-3.

⁴⁴"The Church of God," *SAW*, pp. 240-255.

⁴⁵Reply to Gellius Faber," pp. 739-743.

⁴⁶Cf. Williams, *SAW*, pp. 272f.

⁴⁷"Cherished Instructions on Sin, Excommunication, and the Community of Goods," *SAW*, p. 277.

trine Stadler gave a Hutterite interpretation. One who holds to private ownership and does not desire to "be one (*gmainsam*) with Christ and his own in living and dying . . . is outside of Christ and his communion (*gmain*) and has thus no Father in heaven."⁴⁸ Such community of goods is the highest expression of that "abandon" (*Gelassenheit*) which is essential to Christian discipleship.⁴⁹ "Exclusion" (*ausschluss*), as Williams has pointed out, "is more than the ban of the noncommunitarian Anabaptists, because the whole of the exile's economic and social as well as religious life is involved."⁵⁰ The Hutterites, while avowing separation from the worldliness of *Volkskirche* and *Obrigkeits*, by virtue of their communal living in *Bruderhofs* assigned to some of their ministers semi-civil functions. The concept and practice of community even affected the interpretation given to the Lord's Supper by the Hutterites. The idea seems to have first occurred in the yet undiscovered *Didache*.⁵¹ According to Felbinger,

. . . by means of bread and wine He has shown the community of His body. Even as natural bread is composed by the coming together of many grains, ground under the millstones, and each giving the others all it possesses, they have community with one another, and thus become one loaf; and as, likewise, the wine is composed of many grapes, each sharing its juice with the rest in the wine press, so that they become one drink. Even so are we also . . . He the vine and we His branches, He the head and we His members.⁵²

The third ecclesiological type was the church-kingdom, which at Munster issued in a church-kingdom-state. Thomas Muntzer represented this kind of a concept. The church accordingly is subordinated to the imminent eschatological kingdom. Baptism of professed believers only, the gathering of believers only into a disciplined congregation, and separation from the *Volkskirche* and from the princely rule formed no essential part of this conception. In fact, in Muntzer's case, these elements were conspicuously absent. His "Sermon before the Princes" (1524) reveals his interpretation of Daniel 2, according to which the clay and iron feet and toes (vs. 41-43) represent feudalistic Christendom with its clerical and magisterial power and the "stone," (v. 45) which shall destroy such Christendom, represents Christ.⁵³ The enemies of the prophets of the last days must be destroyed, if need be by violence; "otherwise the Christian church (*kirche*) cannot come back again to its origin. The weeds must be plucked out of the vineyard of God in the time of harvest."⁵⁴ Such "ecclesiological" use of force stands in marked contrast to the re-

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 278.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 279f.; Williams, *SAW*, p. 272.

⁵⁰Williams, *SAW*, p. 274, n. 4.

⁵¹*Didache*, IX, 4; cf. Friedmann, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

⁵²Friedmann, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

⁵³*SAW*, pp. 63f.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 68.

puddiation of force which inhered in the first two types. Muntzer in his Prague Manifesto of 1521 did say that "the new church" would arise in Bohemia.⁵⁵ As Robert Friedmann has stated:

It was to be the church of the new aeon, the church without the godly, an apocalyptic vision, no concrete reality. This is theory. But what was Muntzer's practice? First, he remained to the very end of his life a priest-preacher both in Allstedt and in Muhlhausen city churches, and hence never actually opposed an institution of that kind (either Catholic or Lutheran in nature). Second, his Allstedt League was anything but an Anabaptist brotherhood; it was rather a conspiratorial secret society to promote the imminently expected kingdom of God by means of wiping out, if need be by the sword, all (Catholic) superstition—a chapel was burned down—and all ungodliness. Of a restitution of the primitive church in the Anabaptist sense there is no trace whatever, since Muntzer completely lacked the idea or vision of discipleship and obedience to the Word of God.⁵⁶

Such an apocalyptic church-kingdom arose in more developed form at Munster. The Munsterite theocracy differed from Muntzer's teaching and practice in at least two important respects. It was no apocalyptic society but a state church captured by rebaptizing, chiliastic Spiritualists and never reconstituted on the basis of professed believers only. Likewise, Munsterite baptism was the forced baptism of adults, but not necessarily of those professing faith or evidencing regeneration. Furthermore, the Munsterite theocracy differed from both general and Hutterite Anabaptism in its use of the sword and denial of liberty of conscience and in its lack of discipline after the New Testament pattern.⁵⁷ Munsterism, as indicated by Bernard Rothmann's writings,⁵⁸ was a militant abortive church-kingdom constructed on the equality of the Testaments.

The fourth ecclesiological type in the radical Reformation was that of the inward, invisible, universal, spiritual church, ungathered and without external sacraments or worship. This is the church of the Franckian-Schwenckfelder tradition. Sebastian Franck's "Letter to John Campanus" (c. 1531) is an appeal for this conception of the church. For fourteen centuries, he affirms, the outward church has been concealed in heaven. During this time its outward ceremonies have been yielded to Satan, but their inward truth has continued. Franck believed that only by some special call or commission from God should one undertake any gathering of visible churches. Appeal is made to Campanus not to attempt any such restoration. Instead,

⁵⁵Robert Friedmann, "Thomas Muentzer's Relation to Anabaptism," *MQR*, XXXI (April, 1957), 85.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷John Horsch, "The Rise and Fall of the Anabaptists of Munster," *MQR*, IX (July, 1935), 129-143.

⁵⁸*Supra*, 8, 28.

"let the church of God remain in the Spirit . . . , let them be . . . instructed, governed, and baptized by the Doctor of the New Covenant, namely, the Holy Spirit."⁵⁹ Schwenckfeld was critical of all visible churches as lacking in unity, love, and other qualities.⁶⁰ He stressed a two-nature Christology and hoped that thereupon Christ would "build his chosen church and through it . . . gather the children of God which are scattered over all the earth."⁶¹ While he affirmed, "I know of no Schwenckfeldian assemblage, nor do I desire to secure for myself a following," Schwenckfeld did evoke some religious conventicles in his own day.⁶² Even the power of the keys is said by him to have been invested in the invisible, spiritual church.⁶³ John Bunderlin's *Erklärung* discouraged any restoration of a visible church.⁶⁴ The mysticism of John Denck and of David Joris, together with the latter's concept of the third age, made them sympathetic with this concept of the church.⁶⁵ While Schwenckfeld came to his ecclesiology from Lutheranism, Sebastian Castellio reacted against Calvinism.

This (true) Church is unknown to the Calvinists because, being taken up with their visible and carnal Church and impeded by its visible marks, they are not able to consider and see the spiritual Church. . . . But the children of this celestial Church recognize it just as children recognize their mother, and they know no less their brothers than the carnal know their own. . . .⁶⁶

Obbe Philips in his later years was disinclined to favor the establishment of a congregation with "ordination, office, and order."⁶⁷ Michael Servetus approximated this same kind of doctrine of the church. As a protagonist for antipedobaptism he rejected the Israel-circumcision analogy, and, says Bainton, "the reason was that the Church for him was not a community, self-perpetuating through propagation, but rather a fellowship in the Spirit."⁶⁸ Indeed, for Servetus, "the celestial Jerusalem, the heavenly paradise, the kingdom of Christ is within

⁵⁹SAW, p. 156.

⁶⁰Schultz, *op. cit.*, pp. 327f. Fritz Heyer speaks of Franck and Schwenckfeld as "*die unparteiischen Spiritualisten*," *Der Kirchenbegriff der Schwärmer* (Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger, 1939), pp. 37 ff.

⁶¹*Corpus Schwenckfeldianorum*, ed. by C. D. Hartranft and E. E. S. Johnson (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Hartel, 1907-36), XVI, Doc. MCLXVI, trans. by Schultz, *op. cit.*, p. 281. Hereafter cited as CS.

⁶²CS, XIII, 161-163, trans. by Schultz, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

⁶³CS, XI, Doc. DCCXXXVII, 980.

⁶⁴Friedrich Otto zur Linden, *Melchior Hofmann, Ein Prophet der Wiedertäufer* (Haarlem, 1885), p. 25, n. 2.

⁶⁵Wray, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

⁶⁶Sebastian Castellio, "Bruno Becker MS.," *Church History*, IX, 3 (1940), p. 272, quoted by Bainton, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

⁶⁷"A Confession," SAW, p. 207.

⁶⁸*Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), p. 140. Cf. *Christianismi Restitutio*, p. 412.

us."⁶⁹ Servetus' expectation of the restitution of the Church in A. D. 1585 gave an eschatological emphasis to his thinking. The restored Church was to be identical with the chiliastic kingdom.⁷⁰

Not all representatives of the radical Reformation can be exactly classified according to the preceding four ecclesiological types. The principal case in point is Hubmaier, the former professor of Catholic theology. Perhaps no single leader in the entire radical Reformation retained so many of the thought-forms of the Catholic doctrine of the Church. In his "Twelve Articles of Christian Belief" (1527) Hubmaier affirmed:

I believe . . . and confess a holy Catholic Christian Church, which is the communion of the saints, and a brotherhood of many pious and believing men, who unitedly confess one Lord, one God, one faith and one baptism; assembled, maintained, and ruled on earth by the only living and divine word. . . . O my God, grant that I and all men believing in Christ may finally be found in this Church. . . . I believe and confess . . . the remission of sins, so that this Christian Church has received keys. . . . Again, whomsoever the Church bindeth and casteth out of her assembly on earth, he is bound before God in heaven and excluded from the Catholic Christian Church (outside of which there is no salvation). . . .⁷¹

Herein Hubmaier was not too explicit in distinguishing the universal Church from particular churches, but this he had done in his "Table of Christian Doctrine" (1526).⁷² The particular church may err, but the universal Church is infallible.⁷³ Hubmaier described this relationship by a mother-daughter analogy. "Out of this people (i.e., the universal Church) there has now become a separate and outward church, and a new daughter born of her mother—as the mother, that is, the universal Church, does the will of her husband and spouse, who is Jesus Christ."⁷⁴ Hubmaier, steeped by training in the Catholic ecclesiology, evidently took up that distinction of universal and particular churches which the magisterial Reformers employed and joined to it the Anabaptist distinctives. For Hubmaier the church was the body of the forgiven, the saved; the present social consequences of this corporateness seem not to have attracted his attention.

⁶⁹*Christianismi Restitutio*, p. 375, trans. by Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, p. 141.

⁷⁰Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty*, pp. 83f.

⁷¹Arts. 9, 10, trans. by Henry C. Vedder, *Balthasar Hubmaier* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915), pp. 134f.

⁷²*Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁷³*Ibid.*

⁷⁴"Concerning Brotherly Discipline" (1527), *Ibid.*, p. 206.

III.

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH: PRINCIPAL ANALOGIES AND AFFIRMATIONS

Finally, the nature of the church according to the radical Reformation needs to be examined from the standpoint of the principal analogies applied and affirmations made about the church. Such data is drawn principally from those representatives of the radical Reformation who have been classified under the first, second, and fourth types.

From the earliest Anabaptist records prevails the concept of the church as a brotherhood. The Schleithem Confession bears the German title, *Bruderlich vereynigung etzlicher Kinder Gottes, sieben Artikel betreffend*.⁷⁵ The Tirolese church discipline of the pre-Hutterite period, ferreted from the Hutterite Chronicle and ascribed to Hans Schlaffer (d. 1528) by Friedmann, indicates "how a Christian should live" within the brotherhood.⁷⁶ Nicholas Felbinger wrote that "a devout man is never happier than with his dear brothers and fellows in faith, where each can show the others love and good."⁷⁷

The Anabaptist literature also reveals from the early years another prominent idea, that of the people of God, or the chosen or elect people of God. The Hutterite Chronicle, after tracing history from Christ to the time of Luther and Zwingli, proceeds to say, "But because God wished to have his own people. . . ."⁷⁸ Riedemann described the true church as "the holy people of God,"⁷⁹ and Stadler referred to "the pilgrims of the Lord" and "the elect, the called, the holy ones in this life."⁸⁰ Similarly, the analogy of the remnant was used, especially to differentiate the radical type of restitution from the Protestant and Catholic institutional churches. Marpeck gave emphasis to the idea of "the people of the new covenant."⁸¹

The radicals, as would be expected, applied the Pauline metaphor of body to the church. In writing to Muntzer, Grebel and the others affirmed that the bread of the Supper, "when . . . used in the church, . . . is to show us that we are truly one bread and one body."⁸² The

⁷⁵Wenger, "The Schleithem Confession of Faith," p. 243.

⁷⁶Friedmann, "The Oldest Church Discipline of the Anabaptists," *MQR*, XXIX (April, 1955), 162-166.

⁷⁷Friedmann, "Claus Felbinger's Confession of 1560," p. 156.

⁷⁸"Reminiscences of George Blaurock," *SAW*, p. 42.

⁷⁹Rideman, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁸⁰"Cherished Instructions on Sin, Excommunication, and the Communion of Goods," *SAW*, p. 278.

⁸¹Wenger, "The Theology of Pilgram Marpeck," p. 246, based on Marpeck, *Taufbuchlein*, 188f.

⁸²*SAW*, p. 76.

concept was quite acceptable to the Hutterites, and thus its use can be found in the writings of Riedemann, Stadler, and Felbinger.⁸³

Another metaphor applied to the church was the bridal concept. The true church is declared to be the bride or spouse of Jesus Christ, the bridegroom. Melchior Hofmann elaborated this concept in great detail in his "The Ordinance of God" (1530). Baptism is likened unto a betrothal, the Lord's Supper unto marriage, and between the two is an exodus into the wilderness.⁸⁴ Even Christ himself, declared Hofmann, betrothed himself unto the Father before undertaking his earthly mission.⁸⁵ True Christians come

to the Sabbath and the true rest completely naked and resigned to enter the bed of the Bridegroom where the righteous (re)birth takes place and where one is instructed by God and the Word. And the soul is completely wedded by the grace of God.⁸⁶

The bride owes to the Bridegroom absolute fidelity. The Bridegroom sends his emissaries "to assemble for his Bride out of the bonds of darkness." Even the bread of the Lord's Supper is called "the ring" given by the Bridegroom to the bride.⁸⁷ Drawing from the Song of Solomon, Menno in his "The New Birth" (c. 1537),⁸⁸ his "Foundation of Christian Doctrine" (1539),⁸⁹ and his "Christian Baptism" (1539)⁹⁰ used the simple metaphor of bride and Bridegroom. The metaphor is also used by Riedemann⁹¹ and by Hubmaier.⁹² Interestingly, Servetus in his Pagini Bible of 1545 rejected the interpretation of the Song of Solomon as an allegory of Christ's love for the church.⁹³

The biblical analogy of the holy city or new Jerusalem found frequent usage. Dietrich Philips elaborated the idea in the third part of his "The Church of God."⁹⁴ Accordingly, the true church has the characteristics of the new Jerusalem described in Revelation 21. Philips' interpretation is present rather than eschatological.

A prominent aspect of Anabaptist ecclesiology was the idea of the suffering church. Marpeck stressed the idea of a "*leidende* not a

⁸³Rideman, *op. cit.*, pp. 38, 86; Stadler, "Cherished Instructions . . ." *SAW*, p. 187; Friedmann, "Claus Felbinger's Confession of 1560," pp. 156f.

⁸⁴Williams, *SAW*, p. 183.

⁸⁵"The Ordinance of God," *SAW*, pp. 189f.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 185, 193f.

⁸⁸Verduin, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 93f. This passage also reveals Menno's habit of mixing the metaphors so as to form an extended description of the church.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁹¹Rideman, *op. cit.*, pp. 38, 44, 147.

⁹²"Twelve Articles of Christian Belief," art. 9; "Table of Christian Doctrine"; "Concerning Brotherly Discipline" (1527), "Ground and Reason" (1527); trans. by Vedder, *op. cit.*, pp. 134, 207, 206, 205.

⁹³Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, p. 100.

⁹⁴*SAW*, pp. 255-260.

regierende Gemeinde."⁹⁵ According to David Joris, "the Holy Church is not that which persecutes but that which suffers persecution."⁹⁶ The Hutterite Chronicle could well be described as "the chronicle of a suffering church." Anabaptists gave a positive interpretation to persecution and suffering and criticized the advocates of an invisible, spiritual church for an unwillingness to suffer.

The church as a covenant of believers is to be found in some of the sources. Champlin Burrage found the idea in Sattler's Schleithem Confession, the first clear usage by Jacob Kautz and Wilhelm Reublin of the Strassburg Anabaptists, and the elaboration of the concept by Melchior Hofmann.⁹⁷ According to the Strassburgers,

... when God in His mercy and grace . . . called us from the Devil . . . into his marvelous light, we were not unmindful of the heavenly message, but made a covenant (*Bund*) with God in our hearts, all our days by his strength to serve Him henceforth in holiness and to make known this our purpose to the covenant members (confederates).⁹⁸

The parable of the tares was used by the radicals as well as by others in the sixteenth century. Although claiming usually in implicit fashion that they themselves were the wheat, the radicals more often used the parable in connection with discipline and persecution. Hubmaier, writing before he became an Anabaptist,⁹⁹ and Joris used the parable as a plea for religious toleration. "Better die a thousand deaths than to kill a believing Christian or a righteous soul. . . . Leave the tares," Joris warned.¹⁰⁰ However, Marpeck¹⁰¹ and Menno¹⁰² defended the parable against their opponents who used it as a text against a disciplined church. Both Marpeck and Menno insisted that "the field" is "the world," not the church. On the contrary, Muntzer used the parable to justify magisterial persecution of the Protestant leaders.¹⁰³

⁹⁵Wenger, "Pilgram Marpeck, Tyrolese Engineer and Anabaptist Elder," p. 35.

⁹⁶Quoted by Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty*, p. 137.

⁹⁷Champlin Burrage, *The Church Covenant Idea* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1904), pp. 13-25. Burrage refers to Hans Locher's "*Ein tzeitlang geschwigner christlicher Bruder*" (1523) as possibly the earliest usage; yet the word "covenant" is not used.

⁹⁸T. W. Rohrich, "Zur Geschichte der strassburgischen Wiedertaufer in den Jahren 1527 bis 1543, aus den Vergichbüchern und anderen archivalischen Quellen," *Zeitschrift für die historische Theologie*, trans. by Burrage, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁹⁹"Fundamental Articles, Hubmaier to Eck" (1524), trans. by Veder, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

¹⁰⁰Quoted by Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty*, p. 139.

¹⁰¹Wenger, "The Theology of Pilgram Marpeck," p. 251, based on Marpeck, *Testamentserlauterung*, 210.

¹⁰²"Reply to Gellius Faber," p. 750.

¹⁰³"Sermon Before the Princes," SAW, pp. 68f.

The radicals in common with Catholic and Protestant ecclesiology made use of the term, "the communion of saints." This may be seen in the writings of Menno¹⁰⁴ and Riedemann.¹⁰⁵ The term carries no connotation of a relation between the "Church militant" and the "Church triumphant" but is expressive of that corporate unity which now characterizes God's holy people.

Two very expressive metaphors seem to have been used peculiarly by Riedemann. One of these is that of a "lantern of righteousness." The Church of Christ is the basis and ground of truth, a lantern of righteousness, in which the light of grace is borne and held before the whole world, that its darkness, unbelief and blindness be thereby seen and made light, and that men may also learn to see and know the way of life.¹⁰⁶

Likewise, Riedemann likened the true church to "one plant, one tree, bearing and giving one kind of fruit,"¹⁰⁷ thus giving stress not only to the unity of the church but to its ethical fruitage.

A survey of the Anabaptist understanding of the church would not be complete without reference to the missionary character of the Anabaptist *Gemeinde*, to which careful attention has been given by Littell.¹⁰⁸ Anabaptists took seriously such biblical texts as Matthew 28:19f., Mark 16:15f., and Psalm 24:1. They removed chronological, clerical, and geographical limitations from Christ's Great Commission, for in their eyes "it applied to all Christians at all times"¹⁰⁹ and, within continental Europe, to all places. The "free evangel" rather than compulsory conversion¹¹⁰ was believed to be the *modus operandi* of the true church.

There was a definite transition from the Anabaptist pilgrim, who evangelized and taught where driven by the hounds of the established order, to the missionary whose trips were assigned as part of a grand strategy of spiritual conquest. Generally speaking, the establishment of the economy in Moravia may be used to mark the line of crossing from one dominant type to the other.¹¹¹

Anabaptist martyrdom must be understood not only as the consequence of persecution but as the fulfillment of the evangelistic function of the *Gemeinde* after the manner of the apostolic era. The Anabaptists, to use a modern distinction, were "evangelistic" as well as "evangelical."

Not only the exact nature of the church according to the radical Reformation but the subsequent influence and contemporary relevance of its ecclesiology call for additional study and reflection.

¹⁰⁴"Reply to Gellius Faber," p. 754.

¹⁰⁵Rideman, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, p. 39f.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁰⁸Littell, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-112.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 100.

The apocalyptic church-kingdom of Muntzer and Munster was destined to be reproduced in the Fifth Monarchy Men and related movements in mid-seventeenth century England. Its influence in the modern period has been meager, for the most pronounced millenarian movements have been non-violent.¹¹²

The inward, invisible, ungathered church of the Spiritualists has not been without its sympathizers. To classify the Friends in this tradition is not altogether correct, for despite Quaker inwardness the various yearly meetings can hardly be described as ungathered.

The church-community represented in the Hutterite tradition continues to find embodiment principally in its own Hutterite communities together with the associated communities derived from the leadership of Eberhard Arnold (1883-1935). As communal societies they are perhaps the prime example of non-Marxist communism. Retaining the Hutterite concept of community, the modern Hutterites have lost the early missionary outreach of the movement.

The gathered, baptized, separated, and disciplined congregation of Christian brethren, represented in the sixteenth century chiefly by the Swiss Brethren, the Anabaptists of the Tirol and South Germany, and the Mennonites, has been a primary concern not only of the directly descended Mennonites but also of those gathered churches indirectly related to Anabaptism, namely, the Congregationalists, the Baptists, the Disciples of Christ, *et al.*¹¹³ Bender finds "the Anabaptist vision" to consist of three new conceptions, "Christianity as discipleship," "the church as a brotherhood," and the "ethic of love and non-resistance."¹¹⁴ For Littell, Anabaptism is primarily the source of the idea of the free church, separated from the state and practicing "the prophethood of every believer"¹¹⁵ in a vigorous missionary enterprise.¹¹⁶ The Unitarians, finding their rootage in sixteenth century Anti-Trinitarianism, also espouse the concept of the free church separated from the state, yet without the missionary obligation.¹¹⁷ Generally it may be observed that the Mennonites and the Hutterites have retained more fully the Anabaptist idea of a disciplined congregation separated from the world. The Anabaptist concept of the truly baptized community has been developed more fully by the Baptists and

¹¹²Cf. the Plymouth Brethren and the *Scofield Reference Bible*, Seventh-Day Adventism, and even Jehovah's Witnesses whose Armageddon doctrine enjoins no present use of force.

¹¹³The Disciples are mentioned despite their late (19th century) origin. Cf. the Church of the Brethren, the Churches of Christ, *et al.* No attempt is made here to formulate an all-inclusive list of remote descendants of Anabaptism.

¹¹⁴"The Anabaptist Vision," *MQR*, XVIII (April, 1944), 67-88.

¹¹⁵The phrase was used by H. Wheeler Robinson.

¹¹⁶Littell, *op. cit.*, pp. 111f.

¹¹⁷Cf. Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and Its Antecedents* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1945), pp. 3-11.

the Disciples, while the missionary character of Anabaptism has been extended chiefly through the indirect derivatives rather than through the Hutterites and the Mennonites.

The radical Reformation, especially evangelical Anabaptism, should be allowed to speak amid the ecclesiological ferment of the mid-twentieth century. The apocalyptic, the ungathered, and the communitarian concepts of the church which appeared during the sixteenth century may be said to have less relevance for the contemporary scene than the more general ecclesiological pattern of the Anabaptists. That the Anabaptist attitude toward the civil state may not suffice for Christians who presently live under democratic political order should not deprive contemporary Christians of an opportunity to behold the Anabaptist vision. Ecumenical discussion, which has addressed itself principally to the distinction between "visible churches" and "the invisible Church," could well consider the Anabaptist vision of the church as a brotherhood of disciples—gathered, baptized, separated, and disciplined. Among both the remote and the direct descendants of Anabaptism there is need for re-examining contemporary practice in the light of the Anabaptist heritage. Insofar as Anabaptism bore witness to an essential, indeed early apostolic,¹¹⁸ aspect of the Christian church, its vision must continue, for "*die gottliche Wahrheit ist untodlich.*"¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸Acts 1:15; 6:2; 9:1; 11:1, 26.

¹¹⁹Hubmaier, *Die ander Erbietung* (1524), quoted by Vedder, *op. cit.*, p. i.

